

Counter-Trends - The Best Of Times And The Worst Of Times

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From time to time, I have to take a break from the pressingness of national issues, crises, and scandals to ruminate on larger, longer-term global issues. Earning a spot on the back page.

This approach has been a hallmark of this column for 30-plus years and part of the special contribution that I make to the Earl Moxam-led weekly news review programme, 'That's a Rap' on RJR, as a founding discussant, and which is now marking its 10th anniversary on air. Earl, a kindred spirit, is the best historical journalist and media contextualiser in the country. And his programme deserves every bit of the success it has achieved. There is a hungry market out there. With Ian Boyne no longer around, the long, wide look from my angle is even more important.

Two newspaper pieces last week caught my eye and prompted this piece: Daniel Thwaites' Public Affairs column in The Sunday Gleaner, 'Winning the war on poverty', and an AFP article run by The Observer on Monday, '10 ways the planet could tip into 'Hothouse Earth''. You can hardly find two more counter-trending pieces.

In between the trademark wisecracks that can be either entertaining or distracting, Thwaites delivered a telling defence of the fact of the vast improvement of the human condition over the last few decades. "... The facts are stubborn: Global improvements have been staggeringly positive, so much so that the end of absolute poverty is an achievable goal within most of our lifetimes ...," the columnist writes.

But Thwaites is convinced, and not without reason, that very many people have an emotional need to believe that things are worse now than they have ever been. Psychologically attuned to bad news, "we notice the earthquakes, floods, and wars, but we don't notice that, overall, more people are living healthier, happier, and more secure lives than ever before. We naturally follow headlines, not trend lines." And media everywhere operate on the principle that if it bleeds, it leads.

Take poverty, the subject of the Thwaites column: Even in the short 56 years of our national Independence, barefoot, patch bottom, malnutrition-level poverty has virtually disappeared from our own country despite the trumpeted economic woes.

For most of human history, the vast majority of human beings lived in abject poverty, with the reality of famine only one harvest away for both poor and rich. In 1800, eighty-five per cent of human beings lived in desperate poverty. But by 1990, that figure was down to 43 per cent. And in the last couple of decades alone, global extreme poverty has crashed to only 12 per cent. Some

say the single most important socio-economic graph line in the world is that one showing the dramatic decline of poverty in our times.

Thwaites quotes Marian Tupy of the Cato Institute, and I quote Thwaites: "Despite what we hear on the news and from many authorities, the great story of our era is that we are witnessing the greatest improvement in global living standards ever to take place. Poverty, malnutrition, illiteracy, child labour, and infant mortality are falling faster than at any other time in human history. Life expectancy at birth has increased more than twice as much in the last century" alone than in all of previous history.

And, "The risk that any individual will be exposed to war, die in a natural disaster, or be subject to dictatorship has become smaller than in any other epoch. A child born today is more likely to reach retirement age than his forebears were to live to their fifth birthday."

But she is more likely to face a planet falling apart and less and less able to support human life in the numbers and quality that now exists.

The very next day after the Thwaites piece, along came AFP with a bag of bad news in the story, '10 ways the planet could tip into 'Hothouse Earth'.

"Even if humanity slashes greenhouse gas emissions in line with Paris climate treaty goals, the planet could overwhelm such efforts and irretrievably tip into a hellish 'hothouse'," some scientists are warning in the recently released Proceedings of the US National Academy of Sciences, the story ominously opens.

CLIMATE CHANGE CONCERNS

In this projection, the earth's average temperature would settle some four or five degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels, rather than the 1.5°C-2°C degrees Celsius cap called for in the Paris Climate Accord.

As the world struggles to cut the manmade carbon pollution that is supposed to be driving global warming, climate change continues to outpace the transition to a green, clean global economy, amplifying the likelihood and intensity of deadly heat waves, droughts, and superstorms, the story said.

But the problem will become far more difficult if the Earth itself gets into the act and feeds climate change, the news story said. This is seriously circling close to the sceptic view that natural cycles may be more responsible for global warming and climate change than human action through industrial release of carbon dioxide and other heat-trapping gases.

No less than 10 distinct facets of what scientists call the Earth System could switch from neutral or helpful to harmful, eventually dumping more carbon dioxide and methane into the atmosphere than all human activity combined.

Most of these components of the Earth System have temperature 'tipping points' beyond which the release of these planet-warming gases would be irreversible. There are some people like me who suspect that the tipping point for at least some of these Earth System components are already behind us, not ahead of us, and, therefore, cannot be averted by any human action.

"The feedback process becomes self-perpetuating after a critical threshold is crossed," the Proceedings said. The Earth System may be approaching a planetary threshold that could lock in a continuing, rapid pathway towards much hotter condition, producing 'Hothouse Earth'.

WEAKENED RESOURCES

The forests and oceans of the earth have together absorbed more than half of carbon pollution over the last several decades, even as those emissions grew. But forests are shrinking, and oceans are showing signs of saturation, according to recent studies. These carbon sponges or 'sinks', in other words, may be weakening.

Methane and carbon dioxide trapped in what used to be the permafrost of the far north in Russia, Canada, and northern Europe is roughly equivalent to 15 years of emissions at today's levels. The release of these gases, which has been negligible so far, would speed global warming, and, in effect, hasten their own escape in what is known as a positive feedback loop.

Similarly, rock-like formations in shallow ocean waters called methane hydrates, believed to have been key factors in rapid global warming in the past, are also vulnerable to global warming. Global warming of 3°C could condemn 40 per cent of the Amazon forests to dieback.

Accidental or land-clearing fires, which are not accounted for in these models, could hasten this destruction. In Canada, forests that gained CO₂-absorbing biomass for most of the 20th century began to lose it around 1970, mainly because of climate-related insect infestations and fires.

Taken together, these forest die-offs would release billions of tons of carbon into the air. Melting polar sea ice, especially in the Arctic, means the deep blue ocean water that is released from the melt will absorb as much of the sun's radiation, about 80 per cent, as was reflected back into space by the mirror-like surface of ice and snow. Experts disagree on how much global warming it will take to melt down the West Antarctic and Greenland ice sheets and how quickly they would melt, but all agree that such a tipping point exists, with estimates ranging from one 1°C-3°C.

The consequences for humankind of any such meltdown would be catastrophic: Two-thirds of the world's megacities are less than 10 metres above sea level, as well as much of the agricultural land that provides food for them. West Antarctica's and Greenland's frozen reservoirs, if melted, would raise sea levels by nearly 40 feet. All of these processes are interconnected, the authors note, and the collapse of one could trigger another in a domino effect. "The risk of tipping cascades could be significant at a 2°C temperature rise and could increase sharply beyond that point. This cascade of events may tip the entire Earth System into a new mode of operation," says a co-author of the Proceedings from which AFP drew its story.

The good times have raised the global population and generally the quality of life of humanity, as Mr Thwaites has sought to advise us with hard data. The bad times such as the AFP 'Hothouse Earth' story warns about could reverse a lot of these gains. And we haven't even said anything about the looming disaster of famine from the degradation of soil and sea, and of epidemics of old and new antibiotic-resistant infectious diseases. Massive counter-trends.